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ABSTRACT

Playfulness, a trait previously identified in kindergarten and high school pupils and found related to divergent thinking, was investigated in an exploratory study as a possible teacher characteristic. Sixteen teachers completed an open-ended questionnaire aimed at defining playfulness in teachers. A content analysis produced eight component traits: a) sense of humor; b) kindness, sensitivity; c) cheerfulness, laughter; d) enthusiasm, active participation; e) flexibility; f) imagination; g) at ease, or relaxation; and h) entertainment. There were indications that playfulness in the teacher encouraged divergent thinking in the classroom, thus following the inference that this trait in a teacher influences pupil behavior. (Author/BRB)

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Explorations in Teacher Characteristics: Playfulness in the Classroom Teacher

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Numerous studies in the literature attest to our endeavors to identify teacher characteristics that are conducive to learning. While early studies tended to focus on teacher characteristics alone, there is a growing realization today that research needs to take into account the interaction pattern between teacher and pupil characteristics. In our own approach, teacher traits are, therefore, seen as complementary to pupil behavior.

In previous studies by this investigator (Lieberman, 1965; 1966; 1967), the concept of playfulness was developed and studied in kindergartners and adolescents. In kindergartners, playfulness was conceptualized as a quality of play and identified as physical, social, and cognitive spontaneity, manifest joy, and sense of humor. A factor analysis of teacher ratings showed this trait to be unitary. Playfulness in adolescents, observed in the high-school setting, emerged as two separate factors. One was labeled social-emotional playfulness and consisted of physical mobility, spontaneous joy, humor, friendly wit, group orientation, friendliness and play. The other, called academic playfulness, was saturated with the traits of physical alertness, enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity, as well as with the ringer question assessing achievement orientation.

SP 007 411

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A relationship between divergent thinking and playfulness was found in young children and is also hypothesized at later age levels.

However, the playful child or adolescent does not exist in a vacuum in the classroom, and it is, therefore, important to assess teacher characteristics in order to get a more rounded picture. Specifically, the question arises whether playfulness in a teacher would encourage playfulness in a student and thus lead to increased divergent thinking.

The aim of this study was to explore, in a preliminary format, whether playfulness could be identified in the behavior of a teacher and if so, what effect, if any, it had on classroom climate and individual students.

Procedure

Sixteen teachers (7 teaching in lower primary grades, 7 in the upper elementary grades, and 2 at the JHS level) were given an open-ended questionnaire asking them to formulate 10 traits they would consider under the label of "playfulness" in a teacher. Several briefing sessions were held in the process of formulating the behavioral correlates. These were used to clarify and refine the traits. In the second part of the exploratory study, the teachers were asked to observe their own behavior in terms of the indices developed and comment on their effect in the classroom.

Results

A content analysis of the completed questionnaires produced 27 different traits. Ranking them by frequency of mention produced the following behavioral syndrome of playfulness:

1. Sense of humor
2. Kindness, sensitivity
3. Cheerfulness, laughter
4. Enthusiasm, active participation
5.5 Flexibility
5.5 Imagination
7. At ease, relaxation
8. Entertainment

Traits with mentions of three or below were not included. The descriptive write-ups, though not formally analyzed, supported in their anecdotal records the actual manifestation of the above traits. In the teachers' own evaluations, when these traits were shown, a reciprocity was induced in the children and, in several instances, examples of divergent thinking were described.

Conclusions and Implications

Since this study was carried out by teachers who were attending a graduate course in the education of the gifted, it is particularly significant to note that sense of humor, understanding and flexibility, joy, enthusiasm and imagination are seen as components of playfulness in a teacher. Once identified, it is also encouraging to note that in their self-observations, the teachers displayed some of these traits. Also worth mentioning is the fact that even on a descriptive basis, divergent thinking did occur in the pupils when the teachers were playful. Interestingly, most of the participating teachers were in their twenties or early thirties and had, on the average, about five years of teaching experience. One student who extended her study to include the other teachers at her level of teaching (kindergarten) found considerable resistance among the older and more established colleagues. Some of them seemed quite distressed at the idea of "playfulness" in a teacher. This corroborates earlier findings of this investigator when data were

collected on the playfulness of high-school students. There, too, the older and more established teacher had a more negative connotation of playfulness, even as it applied to high-school students. One of the problems appears to be to establish a dividing line between playful and impulsive behavior. Perhaps, once the playful attributes in a teacher and a child have been refined, these can be contrasted to impulsivity as observed by Heil (1962) in teachers and by Kagan (1966) in children.

The educational implications of the present findings in conjunction with those of the earlier studies point up a continuing relationship between playfulness and divergent thinking abilities. This is not only an intraindividual relationship as found in kindergartners (Lieberman, 1965) but appears to hold also in an interindividual setting. Of course, the latter inference is highly tentative.

The nature of the study reported here was exploratory and further work needs to be built on it. One of the follow-up studies in progress is having teachers observe themselves in the classroom on the dimensions of humorous, entertaining, imaginative, flexible (which includes understanding and sensitive), joyful and enthusiastic behavior. Situational determinants as to when and how this behavior is shown are being collected. Once these dimensions have been established as playfulness in teachers, a more controlled study with outside observers will assess both teacher behavior and pupil reactions.

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